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DUBAI FOR REGIONAL PD HUB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2011  
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [QA](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: QATARI MFA: AL JAZEERA S NOT A BILATERAL  
QATAR-TUNISIA ISSUE

REF: TUNIS 2639 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

¶1. (C) Summary: After recalling its Ambassador from Qatar October 19 in protest at the content of an Al Jazeera interview with a Tunisian opposition member concerning the Tunisian government's hijab policy, the Tunisian government (GOT) announced the closure of its mission to Qatar October ¶25. A Government of Qatar (GOQ) news blackout on the topic for Qatari media was lifted October 26, with the local publication of the GOT statement announcing the closure, and condemning what it termed "a hostile campaign meant to harm Tunisia." The GOQ has not issued a statement on the matter and a GOQ rep told post that the GOT has not officially informed the GOQ of its decision to close its embassy. The Tunisian ambassador is the second Arab ambassador to Qatar to be recalled over Al Jazeera programming, following the recall of the Saudi ambassador in 2002. End summary.

GOQ reaction  
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¶2. (C) Although it initially instructed local media to stay away from the story before lifting the embargo October 26, the GOQ has yet to issue any official statement concerning the incident. PAO spoke October 29 to Ibrahim Al Sahlawi, Director of Arab Affairs at the MFA. Al Sahlawi confirmed that the GOQ has not issued any official statement, noting that it has not yet received official notification from the GOT of their intent to close their mission. Furthermore, Al Sahlawi said, the issue is not a bilateral one: "This is not an issue between the two governments," he said.

Al Jazeera reaction  
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¶3. (C) PAO also spoke with Al Jazeera Chief Editor Ahmed Sheikh, who echoed points made by Al Jazeera chief Wadah Khanfar and reported by international media, to the effect that Al Jazeera is not waging any campaign against the GOT, does not endorse the positions of its guests, and is willing to provide a platform for the GOT's point of view on the topic. "They are very sensitive, autocratic and totalitarian," said Sheikh of the GOT. He confirmed that Al Jazeera has no bureau or registered correspondent in Tunisia: "We have never been allowed to work in Tunisia," he said.

#### Local Tunisian reaction

14. (C) Faisal Baatout (protect), the AFP correspondent in Qatar who covered the story, is also a Tunisian national. He told PAO October 29 that the GOT is blaming the GOQ because, "They don't believe that Al Jazeera is independent. They have tried to stop programs in the past through political intervention and they succeeded, so they try this." He said the local Tunisian community consists of some 7,000 individuals, according to the recently-departed Tunisian Ambassador to Qatar, and all are concerned about the provision of GOT services to Tunisian citizens here. Baatout said there is speculation that the Tunisian mission to Kuwait will send a representative to Doha on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to meet the needs of local Tunisians.

#### Comment

15. (C) The Tunisian ambassador is the third to be recalled from Qatar in the past four years and the second to be recalled because of Al Jazeera programming. The Saudi Ambassador to Qatar was recalled in 2002 (and has not been replaced) because of a debate aired by Al Jazeera critical of the Saudi royal family. In a development unrelated to Al Jazeera, the Jordanian ambassador was recalled last month in protest at the Qatari Government's refusal to vote for the Jordanian candidate to replace UNSYG Kofi Annan. The Al Jazeera establishment is well accustomed to receiving criticism from foreign governments for its coverage and has effectively adopted a blase "take a number" approach to such criticism.  
UNTERMEYER